

THE SOUL OF SUPERVISION INTEGRATING PRACTICE AND THEORY

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Chapter

2



**The Transformative Power
of Journaling:
Reflective Practice as Self-Supervision**

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In my workplace (an adult education center), I facilitate groups that focus on personal growth and development and that promote transformative learning. In one such group, I experienced a particularly negative atmosphere: a number of people appeared unmotivated and a number seemed to be quite distressed as a result of our explorations. I felt constantly criticized and undermined. I blamed myself, feeling that more experience, or better training, or a less reserved personality would have saved the group from failure.¹

A Hurry Through Which Known and Strange Things Pass

Seamus Heaney has written of what I will call a transformational moment, that is, a moment when daily life and consciousness is surprised into awareness in a way that transforms perspective. In the poem “Postscript,” he describes a scene of unusual beauty and dynamism in County Clare, a scene that heightens the poet’s awareness of his own preoccupied mood. Having evoked the beauty and dynamic power of the scene he says:

Useless to think you’ll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.
(Heaney, 1996: 444)

Such a moment can be used as a reference point for people in caring professions. Our lives can be without a doubt “a hurry through which known and strange things pass,” while much of the time our jobs require us to have a vigilant heart that is very much on guard. Like the poet, the caring listener needs to be at once on duty and off guard, available as a listening presence and, at the same time, available to the surprise of self and other.

Professional carers include those in ministry, pastoral care, counselling, spiritual direction, and education: in other words, any profession where the goal is to contribute positively to another's growth and development. Since the self is the core instrument in caring professions (Wosket, 2004), there is a clear need for that self to be listened to and cared for in supportive and challenging ways. The standard way of doing this is in supervision.

I have come to rely on my supervision as a way to maintain myself in my work and to heighten my awareness of myself as a practitioner. At the same time, this self-awareness is an ongoing process that needs to be kept alive at all times in daily practice. Accordingly I have also come to rely on journal writing as an approach to professional development and this has prompted me to research further into journaling as a form of reflective practice and self-supervision (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000: 5-30). This chapter will review key literature concerning journaling as an approach to reflective practice leading to transformative learning, in the context of the critical incident from my own experience summarized above.

Transformative Learning

Mezirow's formulation of transformative learning theory is often taken as the classic version. For Mezirow, people have a "meaning perspective" consisting of the frames of reference they have about the world. These perspectives are derived from the socialization process but are vulnerable to our own adult experience of the world. Any disturbance to them can cause a dilemma which leads to self-examination and which ultimately can lead to perspective transformation:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1991:167)

Baumgartner (2001) demonstrates how this strand of transformational theory is currently being expanded. Firstly, the transformational learning journey is no longer viewed as a linear process, but as a “complex process involving thoughts and feelings.” Secondly, the disorienting dilemma is no longer viewed solely as a single dramatic event, but the theory allows for the possibility of it being a “long cumulative process.” Thirdly, the importance of relationships in the transformational learning process and the role of context and culture are being recognized and acknowledged (Baumgartner, 2001: 18).

In a more recent restatement of his theory, Mezirow (2000) offers the following as hallmarks of perspective transformation:

- › A disorienting dilemma
- › Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
- › A critical assessment of assumptions
- › Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
- › Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- › Planning a new course of action
- › Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
- › Provisional trying of new roles
- › Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- › A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

(Mezirow, 2000: 22)

Journaling

There is considerable evidence that journal writing can be a creative and dynamic way of maintaining vibrant contact with one’s inner life in a way that can lead to personal development (Hunt and Sampson, 1998), professional development (Bolton, 2001), and depth learning (Moon, 2003).

Journaling, as Dymont and O’Connell assert, is “an enduring human practice” (2000: 2). It is increasingly recommended both in learning

settings" (Moon, 2003) and as a tool of professional development and reflection (Moon, 1999). According to Moon, journal writing enhances the writer's capacity for metacognition, which is "the understanding of a person about her own mental processes" (2003: 4). It encourages reflection and this is "associated with deep approaches to learning," that is, the kind of learning where "the intention of the learner is to develop a personal understanding of the material" (2003: 4). Moon views journaling as a process that accentuates favourable conditions for learning that "produces intellectual space in which we can think" and that "encourages independent learning" (2003: 4).

Journaling is one way of using writing as a mode of inquiry (Richardson, 1997; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) into professional and personal experience. As an approach to reflective practice (Bolton, 2005, 2006, 2010), writing can "be a deeply questioning enquiry into professionals' actions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and identity" (Bolton, 2006: 203-4). Writing as an approach to reflective practice allows us to make our taken-for-granted world strange (Bolton, 2006: 204), transmuting experience into a created object available to dialogue. Such an approach offers "the illuminative power of explorative and expressive writing to develop understanding" (Bolton, 2006: 216).

For Bolton, too, reflective writing is an opportunity to put our thoughts and feelings into writing in order to reflect, share, and develop the issues raised. For her there is a paradox at work in the notion of writing as reflective practice. In order to acquire confidence as an effective practitioner one needs to let go of certainty.

The confident, effective practitioner is the one who is able to respond flexibly and creatively to a range of influences, needs and wants of clients or colleagues, and unforeseen events and forces. A practitioner who thinks they know the right answers all the time is bound to be wrong. (Bolton, 2001: 33)

The focus in Bolton's approach to professional reflection is always on our thoughts, feelings, and actions (Bolton, 2001, 15), but more specifically she recommends that we should focus on areas of vulnerability so that we work at our "cutting edge" (Bolton, 2001: 159). She says that "the writing process . . . is creative, a way of gaining access

to each practitioner's deep well of experience not always accessible to everyday channels" (Bolton, 1999: 195).

Writing is used because it is essentially different from talking. It can enable the writer to make contact with thoughts and ideas they did not know they had, with completely forgotten memories, and enable the making of leaps of understanding and connections. It can also enable the expression and exploration of issues which the writer is aware of, but unable or unwilling otherwise to articulate, communicate and develop. (Bolton, 1999: 195)

Reflective writing in journal form is an increasingly widespread way of allowing people to connect with the narrative aspect of their experiences (Rossiter, 2002). Ricoeur has established such an understanding as a constructive way of viewing the self and the development of the self over time. A narrative view allows us to "integrate into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative as a whole" (Ricoeur, 1984: x). The implication of this version of identity is that "the person, understood as a character in a story, is not an entity distinct from his or her experiences. Quite the opposite: the person shares the condition of dynamic identity peculiar to the story recounted" (Ricoeur, 1992: 147). Ricoeur concludes then "it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (Ricoeur, 1992: 148). It follows that telling such stories of our selves in journal form enhances our understanding of the self, both the self of the practitioner and the self of those with whom we work.

D. Best reflects on her use of a learning journal as a professional worker during an advanced training course. She views journaling as "one way of guiding and charting the process of exploration and of reaching insights to inform learning and practice" (Best, 1998: 153). Writing for her became a way of integrating the three areas of her life as a professional, a learner, and an individual self with "a personal world of self, family, and others" (Best, 1998: 153). She claims "integrating those spheres through writing and reflecting on the learning process has led me to understand the creative potential of writing as a keenly appropriate tool for training" (Best, 1998: 153).

Journaling in her view entails “regular and committed writing to record thoughts and feelings about every aspect of work and development, leading to a reflective piece to review progress and identify emerging themes” (Best, 1998: 154). It is also a way of managing and processing feelings, particularly feelings of distress and disturbance.

Two poles of reaction to such distress are possible, to implode or to explode. In other words I may take the experience into myself and not find ways of processing it, or alternatively I may blurt it out, or dump it on someone, again without thinking it through, feeling the feelings, and so on. This is where the journal can provide a holding space that can help us to feel what we need to feel, to think through incidents and events in a way that is healthier for ourselves and for others (Best, 1998: 156–7). Containment is therefore an important aspect of journaling whereby “putting words on paper fixes a version of reality, but at the same time makes it available for reconsideration. Sometimes the very process of writing may prompt subtle shifts in perspective; then re-reading—receiving back the material—allows the thoughts and feelings to return in modified form, making it more possible to reconsider them” (Best, 1998: 157).

Journaling then as an activity that is conducive to processing professional experiences, particularly experiences that are disorienting or distressing, is an important resource in professional life. Through our journals we are in a position to process intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship issues, much as we do in supervision, but in a way that is more accessible and frequent.

Journaling about a Critical Incident

Josephs (2008) talks of “resonant moments” and the part they play in emergent learning. McCormack (2009) suggests that such moments may be used as autoethnographic explorations of professional practice. In the critical incident summarized at the beginning of this chapter, my journal became an anchor point that I used before and after each group. Free floating with ideas, using many of the techniques proposed by Bolton (2001), often using poetry, story making, and retelling stories from different points of view, I most often used the journal as a place to express the heightened feelings I had about this group.

On one particular occasion I was free writing in my journal (Murray, 2005: 74) and a particular image arose, apparently from nowhere, of a snake shedding its skin. I wrote, as always, without questioning what came up. The following day the group began, as usual, with complaints and a combination of people not taking the group seriously and others dealing with their acute distress by blaming. But something changed that day and I had no idea why. The distress began to be heard by others and a dialogue ensued in which I had no part other than as a time and boundary keeper. The depth of contact between the group members was extremely touching. There was real contact at a deep level I had never encountered before with this group that involved mutuality, care, and concern for each other. Towards the end of the group I asked, as I often did, for a word from each group member. The round started and each group member shared, very touchingly, his or her authentic reactions to the process. The last person to speak had said very little throughout the group and I wondered what she would say. She very simply said, "I'm sitting here with an image of a snake shedding its skin."

I was stunned. I had been taking complete responsibility for the apparent "failure" of the group. No matter how many times I processed the issues in supervision, I remained deflated and dejected and feeling incompetent. The coincidence of the two images, however, enabled me to reconnect with the power of relationship. This was, in fact, a matrix of relationship that had its own dynamic, albeit a predominantly distressing one, and that dynamic had culminated in a transformative experience.

Anxiety and Transformative Learning

The process of learning in adult life is "an intrinsically emotional business" (Claxton, 1999: 15) and so it was for both me and the group in this story. The story embodies the process of working in the powerful emotional context in which much of adult learning occurs (Dirkx, 2001, 2006) and points up the way in which the emotional dimension of working with adults operates at subtle levels of our selves. Dirkx (2006: 22) draws attention to how the unconscious aspects of learning about ourselves can surface in images as well as in behaviors, as it did when the snake entered my journal.

The story about my experiences working with an otherwise recalcitrant group places anxiety at the heart of the educative experience. West (2006) offers us a view of how lifelong learning takes place in the context of a postmodern condition. Anxiety stems from a sense of discontinuity and fracture where grand narratives of "familial templates or uncontested knowledge" (West, 2006: 41) are no longer available. This anxiety is generally hidden but will be expressed in a variety of ways.

Anxiety, especially around threats to the self, can generate a whole range of defensive manoeuvres, often unconscious . . . in adult learning. These manoeuvres focus themselves around, for instance, our capacities to cope, or whether we are good enough, or are acceptable to, or even deserve to be accepted by, others. (West, 2006: 42)

The story suggests the need to rehabilitate rather than disown anxiety and points up the possibilities for growth and change. Coping with anxiety requires the appreciation of the educative arena as a "transitional space" where "identity may be negotiated and risks taken in relation to potentially new identities" (West, 2006: 42).

Narratives operate at a level not immediately amenable to conceptualization. Initially I understood my experiences in terms of a narrative of personal inadequacy. However, the denouement I experienced subsequently was of a more revelatory, transpersonal story that could be understood in terms of unconscious processes. In this version of the story, issues of transference and counter-transference, understood as unconscious processes in myself as practitioner and in the group, were being played out and gradually loosened up and resolved in the matrix of the group. The story's center of gravity was not on any one of the selves in the story; no one narrative was privileged in the experiencing, though it is in the re-telling. Instead the denouement was an expression of something that co-emerged from a shared space (Fenwick and Tennant, 2004). It did not emerge from any intentionality on the facilitator's part. Indeed the transformation was what happened when the intention to transform had long ago been abandoned in favour of survival, and therefore some aspects of paradox are at work in the story.

Heaney's poem, "The Riddle," has been helpful to me in understanding the pattern of experience that emerged in working with the group. In the poem Heaney uses the image of a riddle, understood at one level as a sieve for grain or sand, and at another level as a puzzling question, to sift through questions relevant to anyone whose intention is to "do good." The poem surfaces fundamentally puzzling questions about values, about what is good or bad in human choices. It enacts the process of sifting grain and asks what is more valued, that which falls through or that which is retained. There is also a sifting at a more psychological level of questions of value, power, and agency in the image "of the man who carried water in a riddle/Was it culpable ignorance, or was it rather/ A *via negative* through drops and let downs?" (Heaney, 1987: 51).

The poem suggests to me that the intention to set out to "do good," though in itself a central element of ethical practice, is not a guarantee either of success or of good practice. Indeed there may be more value in the mistakes and disappointments of our work than in the unproblematic use of our skills.

The pattern of experience in the critical incident was one of puzzling distress leading to unexpected and un hoped-for insight. It is best understood as a *via negative*, rather than as the planned execution of a set of skills and competencies. It was an experience whose meaning for me and for the group only emerged over a long time and that required a huge amount of sifting in supervision and in my journaling to process it and stay alive to its potential for learning and transformation.

Conclusion

The complexity of any caring endeavor in the postmodern world is self-evident and the demand on the carer is huge. Hawkins and Shohet view supervision as of crucial importance in the caring professions. They maintain "supervision can be a very important part of taking care of oneself and staying open to new learning, as well as an indispensable part of the helper's ongoing self-development" (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000: 5). They say:

We have found that when we have been able to accept our own vulnerability and not defend against it, it has

been a valuable experience both for us and our clients. The realization that they could be healing us, as much as the other way around, has been very important both in their relationship with us and their growth. It is another reminder that we are servants of the process. (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000: 15)

My experience has been that self-supervision in the form of journaling is as important for my own professional development and reflective practice as has been my formal supervision. It has allowed me to contain and to work creatively with my own vulnerability and has provided me with a medium where I can accept, work with, and value my own vulnerability as a crucial resource in the work. When I can support myself to accept my vulnerability and to remain at my own growing edge, I increase the chances of holding, supporting, and challenging others at their growing edges. In my experience that acceptance and vulnerability has invariably been a gateway to the kind of growth that emerges from the shared space of dialogue. In this way the revelatory power of the caring relationship can be held in a creative form.

Note

Although this took place in my own professional life, I have altered important details to protect the identity of the people involved.

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